

**Standard 8-5:** The student will demonstrate an understanding of major social, political, and economic developments that took place in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century.

8-5.2 Compare key aspects of the Populist movement in South Carolina, including the economic and political roots of Populism, the leadership of Benjamin Tillman, conflicts between the Tillmanites and the Conservatives, the founding of land-grant colleges, and the increased racial conflicts and lynching. (H, G, P)

**Taxonomy Level:** B 2 Understand / Conceptual Knowledge

**Previous/future knowledge:**

In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, students summarized developments in industry and technology in South Carolina in the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century, including the rise of the textile industry, the expansion of the railroad, and the growth of the towns (3-5.1). They summarized the effects of the state and local laws, that are commonly known as Jim Crow laws, on African Americans in particular and on South Carolinians in general (3-5.2).

In United States History, students will explain the transformation of America from an agrarian to an industrial economy, including the effects of mechanized farming, the role of American farmers in facing economic problems, and the rise of the Populist movement. (USHC-5.3)

**It is essential for students to know:**

In order to understand the economic roots of the Populist movement of farmers in the United States in general and in South Carolina in particular, students must understand supply and demand. Although South Carolina farmers did not experience the mechanization of farming (cotton was picked by hand well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century) that raised supply in other regions of the country, they did have fertilizers that increased the cotton yield. They were also competing with foreign suppliers. Supply exceeded demand and the price that farmers were able to get for their crops fell throughout the period. Farmers were unable to make payments on the loans that they had taken out to purchase land and equipment. In South Carolina, the problem of debt was exacerbated by the sharecropping and tenant farming system and the crop lien laws which gave creditors first claim to the crop. Farmers first responded to this problem as individuals by planting more so that they could make more profit. However, the more farmers planted, the more prices fell. In South Carolina, farmers also felt the impact of bank foreclosures, forfeiture of their land for non payment of taxes, as well as drought and pests such as the army worm and the boll weevil that led to periodic crop failures.

The political roots of the Populist movement were established in South Carolina, as in other parts of the South and in the Midwest, as a result of these worsening economic conditions. Farmers organized first as the Grange, which was originally a social organization designed to alleviate the isolation of farm life. In the Midwest, the Grange evolved into a political organization. However, in South Carolina the farmers did not have political power, which remained in the hands of the elite Conservatives. Farmers organized in regional Farmers' Alliances in the 1880s that advocated change in the monetary supply, especially the coinage of silver. In South Carolina, where society was segregated by both law and practice, there was a white Farmers' Alliance and a Colored Farmers' Alliance. In the 1890s, alliances around the country united to form the **Populist Party**, which supported the regulation of railroads and banking, the free and unlimited coinage of silver, and a system of federal farm loans. The party also advocated democratic reforms such as the popular election of Senators, the secret ballot, and a graduated income tax. The farmers attempted to ally with industrial workers by advocating an eight-hour day and restrictions on immigration. The Populist Party was successful in electing senators, governors and state legislators in the South and West.

In South Carolina, farmers accepted the leadership of Ben Tillman because of his extraordinary oratorical and political skills. Tillman was a populist in that he appealed to the values and needs of the common people against the Conservative Bourbon elite. However, Tillman was not a true advocate for the ideals of the Populist Party and strove instead to gain control of the Democratic Party in South Carolina. Tillman's demagoguery and political maneuvering were more in keeping with the political machines of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century than they were with the idealistic farmers' reform movement, which advocated more popular control of the government. Unlike other Southern Populists [such as Tom Watson of Georgia], Tillman never supported the appeal of Populists for the vote of the African-American farmers, who suffered as much or more from economic conditions as the white farmer. This appeal led to an increase of violence and lynching against African-Americans and opposition to the Populist Party in many parts of the South. In South Carolina, Tillman ran on a platform of white superiority and later led the movement to further disenfranchise the African-American voter. Tillman's bigotry and racist rhetoric led to the reemergence of the terrorism of the Reconstruction era. Soon violence and lynchings increased and African Americans who dared to protest were intimidated into silence. Race baiting also increased during economic hard times as poor whites took out their frustrations on the easy target.

The fight between the Tillmanites and the Conservative (Bourbon) establishment first got statewide attention with Tillman's support for the establishment of Clemson as an agricultural college and his opposition to the elitism of the University of South Carolina. Tillman advocated the establishment of educational facilities for farmers to teach them better crop management and to develop new crops to increase their economic prosperity. The property at Clemson was a bequest by Thomas Greer Clemson [son-in-law of John C. Calhoun], who supported Tillman's promotion of an agricultural college. However Clemson was also **land grant college** in that its operation was supported by the system of land grant colleges established by the national government [Morrill Act] by which the sale of a portion of western lands was reserved to support agricultural improvements in each of the established states.

The fight between the Tillmanites and the Conservative (Bourbon) establishment had a devastating impact on the rights of African Americans. Although African American and white farmers shared the same problems, Tillman and many of his followers were racists. He ran for governor with the support of the South Carolina Farmers' Alliance on the platform of white supremacy as well as opposition to the Conservative elite. Tillman opposed the Conservative Bourbons because they had done little or nothing to address the needs of the states' farmers and because, despite the Eight Box Law and the poll tax, they generally accepted the rights of some African Americans to vote and hold office. Tillman and the Conservative Bourbon faction of the Democratic Party competed for the nomination for governor in 1890. Tillman won the Democratic nomination and was almost assured of victory since the Republican Party was no longer viable in South Carolina, now part of the "Solid South." However, a Conservative opponent ran as an independent and openly sought the support of the remaining black voters. Whites united against any resurgence of African-American political power and Tillman won the governorship in 1890 and again in 1892. As governor, Tillman did little to enact the platform of the Populist Party. His government did establish a railroad commission to regulate rates and passed legislation that limited the hours for textile workers to 66 hours and 6 days a week. Although nationally the election of 1896 was a pivotal one between the farmers' reform movement and the national conservative establishment, the Alliance movement and the Populist Party it gave rise to, was no longer effective in South Carolina after Tillman's election in 1892.

The impact of the temperance movement in South Carolina (8.5.1) was significant, however, it was not effective because of Tillman's control of the state government. In the 1890s, many socially conservative farmers supported prohibition and voters approved a referendum in favor of prohibition. The legislature passed a prohibition bill, but Governor Benjamin Tillman amended it and instead substituted the State Dispensary system. The state would control the distribution of alcohol. [In 1915 South Carolina adopted

statewide Prohibition. When the country adopted the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment South Carolina bootleggers, like other Americans throughout the country, violated the law.]

In 1895, Benjamin Tillman, now a Senator, urged his followers to call for a new state constitution (8.5.1) to replace the Reconstruction constitution of 1868 and to cement his control of the Democratic Party. He wanted to be sure that the black majority did not provide political support to his Conservative opposition. The new constitution established a literacy test for voting by requiring that voters be able to read and interpret the United States Constitution. It also required that the poll tax be paid six months before the election. Poor farmers had little money so far ahead of harvest time. Poor, illiterate white voters were protected by the “grandfather clause” that provided that if their grandfathers had been able to vote in 1860 so would they. This accelerated the trend in limitations on the right to vote that had begun under the Bourbons (8.5.1). The new constitution required that there be separate schools for black and white children. South Carolinians further limited the social opportunities of African Americans by passing a series of laws, called **Jim Crow Laws**, which set social segregation into law, not just practice. In 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that such laws were constitutional. The Court ruled that separate-but-equal facilities satisfied the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment’s requirement for equal protection under the law in the case of *Plessy v Ferguson*. As a result, nationally sanctioned Jim Crow impacted, both directly and indirectly, every aspect of the African-American experience for most of the next six decades. Although African-American South Carolinians protested their exclusion from public life, violence, intimidation and lynchings by white terrorists effectively silenced them.

#### **It is not essential for students to know**

Although it would be helpful for students to compare the national movement among farmers and the movement of the Tillmanites in South Carolina it is not necessary that students remember the evolution of the Populist movement in other parts of the country. They do not need to remember that in the Midwest, the Grange evolved into an economic and political organization which pooled the buying power of the individual farmers to buy farm equipment at cheaper prices and to elect representatives to state legislatures. Because farmers blamed their economic distress on the railroad for the high prices they charged to ship farm goods to market, state legislatures in the Midwest passed laws designed to protect the farmer, known collectively as the Granger Laws, which tried to regulate how much the railroad could charge for transport and storage. The Supreme Court upheld the right of the states to regulate the rates charged by railroads for storage in stationary grain silos (*Munn v Illinois*). However, the Supreme Court ruled that state law could not regulate the rate charged by the railroad for transportation across state lines because only the federal government can regulate interstate commerce. The federal government then responded with the Interstate Commerce Act, which set a precedent for regulation of business by the federal government. In a series of cases (the *Freight Rate Cases*), the Supreme Court severely limited the effectiveness of this law. All of this will be covered in USHC 5.3.

Although students should know the platform of the Populist Party in order to compare it with the party of Ben Tillman, students do not need to understand why the Populists supported the unlimited coinage of silver in the 1896 elections. They do not need to know that demand for goods is influenced by the amount of money available in the economy. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century was an era of deflation. There was a declining amount of currency available to buy an expanding array of goods. As debtors, farmers wanted the money supply in circulation to be increased. More money in the economy would inflate the price they could get for their crops while at the same time it would allow them to pay off their fixed mortgages with money that was not worth as much as when they took out the loan. Bankers did not want to be paid back in money that was less valuable so they opposed any policy that might be inflationary and advocated *laissez faire*. During periods of depression [1873, 1884 and 1893], farmers were hard pressed to make payments on their loans. Farmers blamed banks and the eastern banking establishment for high interest rates and for foreclosures on farm property that resulted from farmers’ inability to pay their mortgages. As farmers lost their land, many moved to the city for jobs in industry. Farmers took political action to

address their problems. They supported political parties that advocated ‘soft money.’ Again this will be covered in USHC 5.3.

Students do not need to remember the issues that made the national election of 1896 a pivotal one. Although the main issue was “soft” money versus “hard” money, bimetallism vs. gold; the underlying issue was which groups the government would protect: bankers and businessmen or farmers and laborers. They do not need to know about William Jennings Bryan and the “Cross of Gold” speech, the front porch campaign of William McKinley and the role of Big Business in securing McKinley’s election. They also do not need to know that workers voted for the Republican Party because they feared for their jobs and because they did not support an inflationary monetary policy that would raise the price of food.

**Assessment guidelines:**

Appropriate assessments will require students to **compare** key elements of Populist movement in South Carolina with Populism in other parts of the country. Students should be able to **explain** the conflict between the followers of Ben Tillman and the Conservative Bourbons over the establishment of Clemson and in the elections of 1890 and 1892. They should be able to **summarize** why Tillman wanted to disfranchise African American and explain how the Tillmanites accomplished this through the constitution of 1895, Jim Crow laws and increased violence and lynching. Students should be able to **compare** the rights enjoyed by African Americans during Reconstruction to the opportunities for political and social participation during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They should be able to **explain** how Tillman’s policies impacted the movement for Prohibition in South Carolina.